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ABSTRACT

Richard Rodriguez's "Hunger of Memory," which describes his journey from a bilingual, socially disadvantaged child, the son of Mexican immigrant working class parents, to Doctor of English literature, university professor and author, is examined to provide a deeper understanding of what makes the assimilation process happen, what it costs, and why it does not happen for many Mexican Americans. The paper discusses Richard's feelings of culture shock; alienation from the public and family; embarrassment and denial of his past; break from the Mexican culture; hard work as he tries to establish his future; imitation of the cultural values of American middle class; encouragement and acceptance by his new world; feelings of emptiness once he has achieved success; attempt to return to his cultural roots to find a more satisfying meaning to his existence; his discovery of the vast separation that has been created, and will remain irrevocably intact, by the assimilation process. The reasons why Richard became an individual success while other Mexican Americans fail to achieve success are discussed (i.e., his parents' aspirations and definite ideas about their social class, their break with the Mexican culture, Richard's early exposure to the better life, and his private school experiences). (NQA)

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THE SUCCESS OF A MEXICAN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT: AN EXAMINATION OF RICHARD RODRIGUEZ'S HUNGER OF MEMORY

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Much of what is written about Mexican Americans explains their failure to become assimilated into the white middle class culture and the failure of their children to achieve academic success in the middle class school system. In A History Of Educational Neglect, for example, Thomas P. Carter lists the attitudes educators have come to expect from Mexican American children:

> They (1) devalue formal education, especially for girls; (2) see success more in terms of interpersonal relationships than in terms of material acquistion; (3) see time as a gift of life to be enjoyed to the fullest -- and to be enjoyed to the fullest it must not be postponed (the Anglo concept of wasting times is not understood); (4) are fatalistic, feeling they have little control over their natural or social environment: lo que sera sera -- what will be will be. Man's fate is seen to be in the hands of God, luck, or some other unseen force; (5) see change as unappealing and not motivating; (6) are submissive to the statis quo, patient, conformist, and perhaps apathetic; (7) see work only to satisfy need -- the Protestant work ethic is not accepted; (8) attach little importance to time schedules and the Anglo concept of punctuality; and (9) attach much importance to nonscientific explanations of natural phenomena (sickness and so forth). (Page 42).

In his recently published, self-proclaimed "intellectual autobiography," Hunger of Memory, Richard Rodriguez examines his own journey from "a bilingual child, a certain kind -- socially disadvantaged -- the son of working class parents, both Mexican immigrants" to Doctor of English literature, university professor, and author. By carefully examining Rodriguez's work, it is possible to come to a deeper understanding of the assimilation process -- what makes it happen and what it costs -- and to make some judgements about why it is not happening for so many other Mexican Americans.

Rodriguez first became aware that he and his family were different from the host culture through language. "During those years when I was first conscious of hearing, my mother and father addressed me only in Spanish; in Spanish I learned to reply. By contrast, English, rarely heard in the house, was the language I came to associate with gringos."(13) At first the young boy becomes intimidated by the gringos because they speak in a volume and a tone that exudes confidence while his parents respond in faltering, soft spoken and subservient phrases. On the one hand, the boy became ashamed of his parents and their inability or unwillingness to be strong and forceful with the Americans, but, on the other hand, he felt drawn more closely to his family, seeking protection from the outside world on a little island of Spanish intimacy.

> There were many times like the night at a brightly lit gasoline station when I stood uneasily, hearing my father. He was talking to a teenaged attendant. I do not recall what they were saying, but I cannot forget the sounds my father made as he spoke. At one point his words slid together to form one word -- sounds as confused as the threads of blue and green oil in the puddle next to my shoes. His voice rushed through what he had left to say. And, toward the end, reached falsetto notes, appealing to his listener's understanding. I looked away to the lights of passing automobiles. I tried not to hear anymore. But I heard only too well the calm, easy tones in the attendant's reply. Shortly afterward, walking home with my father, I shivered when he put his hand on my shoulder. The very first chance I got, I evaded his grasp and ran on ahead in the dark, skipping with feigned boysish exuberance. (15)

At this point in his life, Richard was not a part of the American culture -- he was a Mexican living on American soil, a member of a family, not a citizen of a country. And his alienation from the public made him

closer to his parents. He did not feel unhappy during these years; in fact, throughout the years of dramatic change that he undergoes, he refers frequently and with affection to this simple and warm time of his life. The continued use of a foreign language would have prevented the Rodriguez family from ever becoming a part of American culture, but as the children became school age, the public demands of the school invaded the private existence of the family.

For the first half year of Richard's education in a Catholic grammar school, he remained silent while his older brother and sister made difficult progress. And during these first five months, the private life of the Mexican family remained separate from the public life of the American school. Then came the invasion:

> Until on Saturday morning three nuns arrived at the house to talk to our parents. Stiffly, they sat on the blue living room sofa. From the doorway of another room, spying the visitors, I noted the incongruity -- the clash of two worlds, the faces and voices of school intruding upon the familiar setting of home. I overheard one voice gently wondering, "Do your children speak only Spanish at home, Mrs. Rodriguez?" While another said, "That Richard especially seems so timid and shy." (20)

It was on this day that Richard became a student and that he was forced to take his first steps toward becoming an American. In an attempt to comply completely with the suggestions of the teachers, his parents would never again use Spanish in front of the children. One vivid memory the boy has from this time of his life is an occasion when his parents had been speaking in Spanish to one another and shifted into English when they saw him enter the room. The intimate family circle was broken for Richard at this moment. Something was gained in that he was now pushed

out into the public world, a world where he would, afterall, have to prove himself. But something was lost as well since he would never again have the same feeling of closeness to his parents. The family shared a strong love for one another but they were no longer on their island, no longer protecting each other from the ominous threat of the gringo culture.

> Again and again in the days following, increasingly angry, I was obliged to hear my mother and father: "Speak to us en ingles." Only then did I determine to learn classroom English. Weeks after, it happened: One day in school I raised my hand to volunteer an answer. I spoke out in a loud voice. And I did not think it remarkable when the entire class understood. That day, I moved very far from the disadvantaged child I had been only days earlier. The belief, the calming assurance that I belonged in public, had at last taken hold. (22)

Language, then, is significant in the acculturation and assimilation processes. When members of an ethnic group hang on stubbornly to their native tongue, they keep themselves completely separated from the host culture. When they use both languages, they divide themselves into a public and private existence; they wade, in a sense, waist deep in the host culture but refuse to immerse themselves totally. Only when they make a total committment to the language of the host culture -- both in public and in private -- can they begin the first meaningful steps toward complete assimilation. Given his own experiences, it is no wonder that Rodriguez is an opponent of bilingual education.

> Today I hear bilingual educators say that children lose a degree of "individuality" by becoming assimilated into public society. (Bilingual schooling was popularized in the seventies, that decade when middle-class ethnics began to resist the process of assimilation -- the American melting pot.) But the bilingualists simplistically scorn the value and necessity of assimilation. They do not seem

> to realize that there are two ways a person is individualized. So they do not realize that while one suffers a diminished sense of private individuality by becoming assimilated into public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of public individuality. (26)

By becoming assimilated, by shedding Ricardo to become Richard, Rodriguez can more fully develop his potential as a man and can more fully participate in the social and political advantages of being an American citizen.

As Rodriguez became more and more involved in his new life as an American student he found himself undergoing a often painful separation from his family and his past as a Mexican child. He became a "Pocho," a Mexican American who, in becoming an American, forgets his native society. And the change in Rodriguez and his brothers and sisters was not produced without controversy:

> Embarrassed, my parents would regularly need to explain their children's inability to speak flowing Spanish during those years. My mother met the wrath of her brother, her only brother, when he came up from Mexico one summer with his family. He saw his nieces and nephews for the first time. After listening to me, he looked away and said what a disgrace it was that I couldn't speak Spanish. He made that remark to my mother; I noticed, however, that he stared at my father. (29)

What is most interesting about this episode is that the Mexican family's attempt to become assimilated into the American culture is met with resistance, NOT from the host culture, but from the relatives and friends of the same native culture. Perhaps because of the Mexican's ability to travel back and forth so easily from one country to another, the immigration to America seems only temporary at first while the family takes a wait-and-see

attitude about their new home. This quality of impermanence or experimentation in turn makes the Mexican immigrant reluctant to give up the cultural aspects of his homeland, a homeland to which he might soon return. Richard's uncle was angry, then, because he understood what Richard himself would soon come to understand: in order for him to become an American in the fullest sense, he would have to cease being a Mexican.

For Rodriguez, the private school he attended became an essential ingredient in his assimilation; it became for him a place to turn to ameliorate the sense of loss he felt at home. As Richard is told, as most good students are, "Your parents must be very proud of your accomplishments," he couldn't help but detect the irony in the situation since it was his education that was pulling him away from his parents.

> What I am about to say to you has taken me more than twenty years to admit: A PRIMARY REASON FOR MY SUCCESS IN THE CLASSROOM WAS THAT I COULDN'T FORGET THAT SCHOOLING WAS CHANGING ME AND SEPARATING ME FROM THE LIFE I ENJOYED BEFORE BECOMING A STUDENT. That simple realization! For years I never spoke to anyone about it....Not until my last months as a graduate student, nearly thirty years old, was it possible for me to think much about the reasons for my academic success. Only then, at the end of my schooling, I needed to determine how far I had moved from my past. The adult finally confronted, and now must publicly say, what the child shuddered from knowing and could never admit to himself or to those many faces that smiled at his every success. ('Your parents must be very proud....') (45)

To explain his experiences, Rodriguez refers to a work by Richard Hoggart titled The Uses of Literacy. In it Hoggart refers to the change that takes place in the children of working class families as they become more and more educated. As the boy becomes a successful student he must first cut himself

off mentally from his parents and their nightly activities in order to complete his homework. Soon he finds himself cut off intellectually as well as he begins thinking about "ideas never considered at home by his parents." (47)

> Not for the working class child alone is adjustment to the classroom difficult. Good schooling requires that any student alter early childhood habits. But the working class child is usually least prepared for the change. And, unlike many middle class children he goes home and sees in his parents a way of life not only different but starkly opposed to that of the classroom. (He enters the house and hears his parents talking in ways his teachers discourage.) (47)

Two imporatant points are made here I think. First, one of the difficulties with assimilation that is not discussed much but seems, at least according to Rodriguez's experiences, to be significant is as a child becomes more Americanized through education he must leave his parents behind him. The love shared between a child and his parents is one of the deepest and strongest of all human emotions, and it would seem reasonable to think that any threat to this bond would be looked on unfavorably by both parent and child. In education we often remark about how important and yet difficult it is to get parental cooperation with our educational efforts. Perhaps Rodriguez's experiences offer a clue as to why parents sometimes seem unable or unwilling to help in the educational process and why some children are reluctant learners: maybe both parent and child share the never stated but hauntingly felt fear that education is a threat to their bond. And perhaps this same fear is the reason that cultural assimilation is met with resistance rather than encouragement from one's family members. Education and assimilation could be looked on in this light as enemies to the family unit.

Second, Rodriguez in quoting Hoggart refers to Hoggart's emphasis on class rather than ethnicity. For the most part, Rodriguez's parents were middle class -- they moved into an Anglo neighborhood, sent their children to private schools, both worked to afford the trappings of middle class life, they stressed education and its resultant benefits to their children, etc. As Rodriguez uses "working class" in this passage it seems that he is implying lower class, and he and his parents are not members of this group. However, further discussion about what makes Rodriguez's experiences atypical of the lower class Mexican immigrant will be discussed at a later time. Suffice it for now to say that one of his advantages was that his parents had a middle class mentatlity even though they were members of the "working class."

Richard became more than a good student; he became one of "those Hoggart pejoratively terms 'scholarship boys,' for whom success comes with special anxiety. Scholarship boy: good student, troubled son... Here is a child who cannot forget that his academic success distances him from a life he loved, even from his own memory of himself." (48) The scholarship boy finds himself embarrassed by his parents' lack of education (and, in this case, their lack of Americanization), and turns to his teachers and the procedures and doctrines of the classroom to find support.

> I began by immitating (my grammar school teachers') accents, using their diction, trusting their every direction. The very first facts they dispensed, I grasped with awe. Any book they told me to read, I read — then waited for them to tell me which books

> I enjoyed. Their every casual opinion I came to adopt and to trumpet when I returned home. It was the nun's encouragement that mattered most to me. She understood what my parents never seemed to appraise so well -- what all my achievements entailed. (49)

Richard admits that at first he felt angry with his parents for pushing him away from them through their use of English in the home. His attempts to do well in school and then flaunt his new knowledge at home was his way of getting even with his mother and father. Later his anger was replaced with guilt as he found school becoming more and more attractive to him. By the fourth grade he had become an avid reader, and frequently at home he would keep to himself reading night and day. And all the while he met with nothing but encouragement from home. His mother told him to get as much education as possible because she saw in education an opportunity for job advancement and his father recognized that education might enable his children to escape from a life of mere labor.

Through education Richard became assimilated into the public life of an American scholarship boy as he finds adults impressed with his accomplishments and willing to offer their assistance at every turn. But with his peers there is a degree of discomfort since they look on him as a "Kiss Ass," a boy <u>too</u> agreeable, too eager to please the adults. For Rodriguez a long time ensued when he felt caught between two worlds, belonging to neither. His academic success has been accomplished primarily through imitation rather than original thought. He has become an academic parrot, a copier of ideas, not a thinker. And because he is aware of how he has achieved academic success, he is unsure of his place in an academic world. Furthermore, the academic world

even for those who belong fully and confidently in it is a lonely place:

> Whenever I opened a text that hadn't been used for years, I realized that my special interests and talents united me to a mere handful of academics. We formed an exclusive -- eccentric! -- society, separated from others who would never care or be able to share our concerns. The pages I turned were stiff layers of dead skin. I began to wonder: Who, beside my dissertation director and a few faculty members, would ever read what I wrote? And: Was my dissertation much more than an act of social withdrawal? (70)

Because his new world, the world of an American scholar, proved to be dissatisfying, Richard begins feeling nostalgic. He wanted a life filled with people instead of books, a life of passionate involvement with other human beings. He returned, therefore, to the only real warm and intimate experiences of his life -- those he shared with his family. At first his return to the family brings him a sense of joy. He notices that he he is comfortable being with them, even in silence. He feels that he belongs, that he is a part of their life: "My father's eyes were much like my own."(71) But he is not the same little boy that he was pushed off the family island.

> After the early relief, this return, came suspicion, nagging until I realized that I had not neatly sidestepped the impact of schooling. My need to think so much and so abstractly about my parents and our relationship was in itself an indication of my long education. My father and mother did not pass their time thinking about the cultural meanings of their experience. It was I who described their daily lives with airy ideas. (72)

Although the knowledge that he is different from his parents through his education is painful, it enables him to give expression to his feelings, to understand himself, and to draw important conclusions from his immediate experiences.

The experiences of Richard Rodriguez offer a microcosmic study of the assimilation process. At first he felt, like first generation immigrants, culture shock. The host culture was a hostile place and he retreated to the safety of his ethnic island. As he is pushed unwillingly from this private life to the public life of a grammar school student, he must learn the language and customs of the host culture. Because he is bright, he finds himself accepted by this new world, and the hostility he once perceived is now replaced by encouragment and acceptance. It is at this stage in his development that he turns with anger and embarrassment on his past, that he denies his past as he tries to more firmly establish his future. His hard work and, more importantly, his faithful imitation of the cultural values of American middle class produce a vast amount of success. Once he has achieved success, however, he realizes that there is a certain emptiness in this new place in his life. What had looked so good to him from a distance is not so satisfying once it is possessed. And, again like many immigrant groups that have "made it," he returns to his cultural roots to find a deeper and hopefully more satisfying meaning to his existence. But, as Rodriguez says about Alex Haley, the author of the popular Roots, "That book tells us more about his difference from his illiterate, tribal ancestors than it does about his link to them." (161) You can't go home again, and Rodriguez and immigrant groups find this out when they return to their ethnic roots only to discover the vast separation that has been created-and will remain irrevocably intact-by the assimilation (education) process.

Why does Richard Rodriguez, "the son of working class parents, both Mexican immigrants," become such an individual success when national statistics indicate the great failure of Mexican Americans to achieve success in middle class America? The most important contributions were made by his parents. They were both members of the working class, but they had definite and foreceful aspirations for themselves and their children. When his father first came to America he held a series of unskilled jobs, but he made attempts to give his life an additional cultural dimension -- he attended classes for a time in pursuit of a high school education, he attended Italian grand opera, he would dress in fine clothes and attend polo matches in Golden Gate Park. A warehouse job that made him "old before his time" eventually stopped his cultural pursuits, but he remained frustrated and dreamed of a better life for his children. Richard's mother did finish her high school education in night classes and went on in school to learn to type because she felt that typing skills would entitle her to more interesting and rewarding jobs. His parents were not beaten down by the disappointments of their life;instead they passed on their dreams to their children and taught them at an early age to have self respect and to pursue the American dream:

> When my older sister, then in high school, asked my mother if she could do light housework in the afternoons for a rich lady we knew, my mother was frightened by the idea. For several weeks she troubled over it before granting conditional permission:'Just remember, you're not a maid. I don't want you wearing a uniform.' My father echoed the same warning. Walking with him past a hotel, I watched as he stared at a doorman dressed like a Beefeater. 'How can anyone let himself be dressed

> up like that? Like a clown? Don't you ever get a job where you have to put on a uniform.' In summertime neighbors would ask me if I wanted to earn extra money by mowing their lawns. Again and again my mother worried: 'Why did they ask you? Can't you find anything better?' (120)

His parents, then, gave Richard and his brothers and sisters definite ideas about the class that they belonged to, and these ideas apparently took root and had an important effect on the children. When the children have grown, the oldest son has become a lawyer and two of the daughters are business executives.

The parents also helped their children because they did not insist on clinging to their past, the ethnic heritage, at the expense of their present. As mentioned earlier, when they bought their first home they did not move into the Mexican neighborhood, but surrounded themselves instead with upwardly mobile Anglos. Their willingess to speak English in the home at the expense of the criticism of friends and neighbors who accused them of losing "the old ways" shows their determination to Americanize their children. They made their children understand that it was important for each of them to become successful on America's terms since that was their new home. They did not, on the other hand, give the children the impression that Mexico was their true home while America was only a temporary stop along the way.

The children were also afforded a big advantage in that their parents had middle class mentalities, held sacred middle class values. They believed in hard work, in education as a stepping stone to success; they valued material wealth and encouraged their children to achieve greater wealth than the parents; they understood the importance of postponing gratification in order to achieve

a greater reward at a later date; and, perhaps most importantly, they had the opinion that the good things in life were attainable, that they could be earned, rather than granted only to a few through dumb luck or divine intervention. Richard and his brothers and sisters, then, had to make a transition from middle class Mexican to middle class American; a much shorter and less painful jounery than that from lower class Mexican to the same destination.

Beside being blessed with parents that helped him on his route to success, Richard had several other advantages. He grew up with the sons and daughters of some very wealthy Californians and was given, therefore, an early exposure to the "better life." He could actually experience first hand many of the things that his parents talked and dreamed about.

His first school experiences were private school experiences. He was surrounded by students whose parents cared enough about education that they were willing to pay for it and who could afford to pay for it. And there are some things that can be done in private schools that might be considered questionable in a public school environment. The parents never once assumed that the nuns who visited to tell them about their language problem were interfering in an arena that exceeded their bounds. The nuns and the priests had a right to involve themselves in the intimate lives of their parishoners, and the parishoners had a duty to oblige. The quality of instruction Richard received was apparently good since it successfully prepared him for his university work. Furthermore, his initial school

experiences were good experiences, encouraging him to pursue his studies with greater and greater enthusiasm.

What can be learned from Richard's success to explain the failure of countless others? First and most important, many Mexican immigrants are not middle class families or poor families that have middle class values. They are instead lower class families and they do not necessarily share the value system of middle class Americans. If, for example, they have attitudes listed in Carter's work (page one of this report), it is no wonder that they will not become middle class successes. Many immigrants, according to Rodriguez, believe that it is possible for them to maintain their native culture without loss while attaining the benefits of the host culture. This belief has led, for example, to an emphasis on bilingualism with a hope that a Mexican American (or any immigrant, for that matter) can possess two cultures successfully. However, when the values of the two cultures clash in such a brutal and obvious fashion, there is no possibility that the dual-culture theory will work in practice.

Secondly, the clash of cultural values will be made apparent in the school, the place that bears a primary responsibility for aiding the assimilation of immigrants. Richard Rodriguez met with success in school because his parents valued education and believed in the same values the school stressed. A lower class Mexican immigrant, on the other hand, would meet with failure in school, and, since his initial experience would be a distasteful one for him, the chance of the boy being successful in the later stages of his education would decrease considerably. Furthermore, the poorest families

are usually given a city's poorest schools. The advantages that Rodriguez was given in the parochial school are denied to many Mexican immigrants of the lower class. Growing up in a poverty stricken area of a city will also severely limit a child's exposure to life's possibilities. The world for a poor child consists of other poor children and their poor parents. What is there, then, to strive for?

The clannishness of the Mexican culture was broken by the Rodriguez family -- the parents found themselves in conflict with other family members when they broke the ethnic bond. For many Mexican families, that same bond is not broken and the children in these families do not have the opportunity Richard had to become Americanized by other children from other backgrounds. Poor English language skills on the part of the parents is a symbol of the ethnic groups refusal to leave behind them their native culture. They surround themselves with other members of the same ethnic clan (many times members of the same family live on the same street) and thereby insulate themselves from America. The ethnic neighborhood becomes an ethnic island and the gringos and their influence are walled out.

Finally, the government attempts are, in Rodriguez's opinion, more harmful than helpful in assimilating Mexican Americans. Affirmative action programs brought Mexican American students to the college campus that were unprepared for the demands of a good college education because they had not received the kind of quality education in grammar school and high school needed for success. The result in many cases was that many Mexican Americans

met with failure in college, which would, of course, diminish the sense of ethnic pride necessary for a group to improve its social position. Or in many cases the colleges lowered their standards to enable the immigrants to meet with success. This second alternative, in Rodriguez's opinion, is also harmful to an ethnic's sense of pride and accomplishment. (He refused several positions at major Ivy League universities because he did not want jobs offered to him on the basis of his minority status.)

Rodriguez leaves us with the impression that the struggle for assimilation, for success American style, is a struggle not of ethnic groups but of families. His book, as is much of his life, is dedicated to his parents: "For her and for him — to honor them." His advice to all who would achieve success in middle class America is two fold. First, accept the break with the past, with the cultural roots which bind instead of nourish. Second, carve a new identity out of America's possibilities as an American citizen. (Being a Mexican-American, one who successfully holds membership in both groups, is impossible as he has learned from his own experiences.) This is not a traditional American success story in that Rodriguez makes us thoroughly and painfully aware of what his success has cost him. His autobiography ends with a description of a Christmas celebration at which all of Richard's completely Americanized and successful brothers and sisters, their wives and husbands and children, gather with his parents. And the last pages make clear that things are not what they were when this family first moved to America and clung together for protection on their intimate family island:

> Children are bundled for the fast walk to the car. My mother stands by the door calling good-bye. She stands with a coat over her shoulders, looking into the dark where expensive foreign cars idle sharply. She seems, all of a sudden, very small. She looks worried.
>
> "Don't come out, it's too cold," somebody shouts at her or at my father, who steps out onto the porch. I watch my younger sister in a shiny mink jacket bend slightly to kiss my mother before she rushes down the front steps. My mother stands waving toward no one in particular. She seems sad to me. How sad? Why? (Sad that we all are going home? Sad that it was not quite, can never be, the Christmas one remembers having had once?) I am tempted to ask her quietly if there is anything wrong.
>
> My brother drives away.
>
> "Daddy shouldn't be outside," my mother says. "Here, take this jacket out to him."
>
> She steps into the warmth of the entrance hall and hands me the coat she has been wearing.
>
> I take it to my father and place it on him. In that instant I feel the thinness of his arms. He turns. He asks if I am going home now too. It is, I realize, the only thing he has said to me all evening. (195)

There are minks, and foreign cars, and impressive salaries and degrees, but there is a sense of sadness, a sense of loss. To become Americanized one must give up something: the feeling of warmth, of belonging one gets from membership in an ethnic group (and family) that is trying to protect itself from the threats and challenges of the host culture.

Richard Rodriguez, Hunger of Memory, Boston, David R. Godine, 1981

Thomas P. Carter, Mexican Americans in School: A History of Educational Neglect, New York, College Entrance Examination Board, 1970